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ABSTRACT

The federal contribution to overall educational expenditure in the United States is extremely modest, and has traditionally been focused on special issues and special populations at each educational level. However, the programs have strengthened academic resources and initiated significant efforts in many areas. While funding cuts are currently being considered, the need for foreign-language-related services is clearer than ever in international trade and international relations. Language teachers will be expected to correct problems they have not created. They can do this by acknowledging the importance of the language teaching profession and supporting changing language requirements at all levels of education. (MSE)

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Teaching Foreign Languages: Policy and the Federal Role

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The Honorable Paul Simon,
Senator from the State of Illinois
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities

At first glance, Washington, D.C., appears a long way from elementary, secondary, and college classrooms. With a national expenditure of $250 billion on education, $17 billion in federal funds for education is an extremely modest contribution, and that contribution is focused on special issues and special populations.

Familiar federal programs target dollars through Chapter I funding for the disadvantaged and student aid for college and university tuition. The federal commitment generally falls into the categories of providing equal access and equal opportunity, rather than support for specific disciplines, techniques, and studies that may be underfunded at the state and local level. Federal education budget targeting with its low priority for specialized academic disciplines and techniques is a reality. Just as real is a growing interest at the national level in encouraging support for particular fields of study.

Focused support is not new, although it has traditionally been modest and cyclical. At the end of the 1950s, Congress appropriated funds for the National Defense Student Loan Program to encourage postsecondary study of mathematics and science. In 1964, Congress created the National Foundation for the Arts and the Humanities to offer support for institutions and individuals studying, performing, and writing in these disciplines. The National Science Foundation has long given fellowships for advanced study in mathematics, engineering, the physical and natural sciences, and behavioral sciences.

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A national consciousness of need and utility has usually driven the creation of programs of support for distinct disciplines in education. Since 1975, my first year in Congress, I have pushed to raise the federal consciousness of the critical need to assist the teaching and learning of foreign languages at all levels of education. Over the last decade, national government has responded slowly. We now have a healthy system of specialized language and area resource centers at over ninety colleges and universities in this nation, funded through Title 6 of the Higher Education Act. The number of students served is small and the purpose is limited, but the goal of supporting study of all areas and languages on this globe has been reached. For the business community and general population, however, these centers have an indirect effect. There has been some strengthening of academic resources at the host postsecondary institutions; however, undergraduates are not routinely served, students in fields such as teacher education are not served, and resources are not readily available to the secondary school teacher or the secondary school student.

The U.S. Department of Education has a small program that assists local school districts in the development of innovative foreign language programs. It is a new initiative and we have no information on its success as yet. It is a start, however, and the $1.3 million appropriated annually for the program is $1.3 million more than we have ever had before through a federal department.

The newly reauthorized Higher Education Act provides for summer institutes of intensive foreign language programs and a new initiative to support exemplary demonstration programs in language at colleges and universities. I hope that we will see a foreign language component in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization, which will be enacted in 1987. Federal resources, limited as they may be, should and *can* be used in this critical area.

Independent federal cultural agencies have begun looking at internalization of their program, and in 1985, the National Endowment for the Humanities announced a concentration through their Education Division that invites schools at all levels to apply for assistance for programs on international education with foreign language instruction acknowledged as a necessary portal through which a student must pass. Several million dollars could be committed to this program, depending

on the number and quality of applications. Again it is a small start, but significant because it is a new initiative based on a recent and growing interest in and understanding of the importance of our internationalized economy and society.

At the writing of this article, there is bad news also. The Fulbright Exchange Program faces a possible cut of 25 percent in appropriations for the coming year. Rather than a comment on the program itself, it is a clear indication of the fiscal pullback in all programs at the federal level. It is in this context that we should consider the new programs previously mentioned, and their importance increases when we realize that the odds were against their creation and funding.

There is no need to belabor the point that an internationalized economy and society require the understanding of other languages and cultures. Horror stories of marketing mistakes in other nations and technical competition abound in the news daily. In addition, the scope of international trade and marketing is immense:

- The thirteen largest banks in the U.S. derive almost half their total earnings from overseas credits.
- American business depends on international trade for 30 percent of its profits and 40 percent of our farmland produces for export.
- A recent study by the Southern Conference of Governors estimates that 80 percent of U.S. businesses that could be exporting are not.
- Forty-three percent of U.S. patents issued in 1985 went to non-U.S. companies and individuals.

On the plus side, many in the business community, state and local education agencies, and Congress see a need for foreign-language-related services. For example, Congress recently approved legislation to provide for the translation of various foreign technical periodicals to ensure that our manufacturing and technological industries are aware of what is going on around us. Congress is providing funds because there is a need, a need that is not met by language-competent members of the business community.

We cannot help but learn about the relationship between language

and business when a Japanese official commented that a $2 billion investment in a Mitsubishi plant in Illinois was decided, in small part, because the local high school taught Japanese.

Our missteps and our lack of competitiveness have not always translated into corrective actions in education. The push in this case would be from the top down—those businesses who need to hire language-competent employees will look to the schools. And students who want to work in any number of occupations will see that language training gives them an edge in the job market. Perhaps this could be called the capitalistic theory of language study. Examples of Chase Manhattan Bank recruiting at language schools rather than business schools, and the employability of the recent class of Wharton School graduates who were double majors in business and language suggest that it is working, however slowly.

In addition to the business pressure on education, colleges and universities can also encourage more language training at the elementary and secondary level. Increased entrance requirements in foreign language study would quickly translate into a school board providing courses that enable students to meet these requirements. This also is becoming a reality. In the next two years, admission to the California State University system will require two years of foreign language study. In the most recent year reviewed, seventy-six colleges *added* language requirements for entrance at a time when the number of students in the eighteen-year-old pool of applicants has decreased. However, less than one in ten colleges and universities requires foreign language study for admission.

It is unclear which came first—lowered language requirements for college admission or fewer students applying to college having taken languages in elementary and secondary school. The important point is that in many state systems and private colleges we are seeing a slow turnabout. The change is slow because of where we are now.

Only 4 percent of high school graduates have had four or more semesters of a foreign language. Only 14 percent of all students entering colleges have had such training. Once in college, requirements for graduation vary widely, with language an inconsistent requirement often based on a student's choice of a major. Computer language can be substituted in many cases for a foreign language, and most academic majors

do not require any language at all. We are the only nation in the world where one can earn a doctoral degree with *no* language training at all.

The standard liberal arts curriculum, which had been a tradition in U.S. postsecondary education, is no longer the dominant curriculum, and currently less than one million postsecondary students are taking any language at all—with over 67 percent of those students taking entry-level French or Spanish. Of those taking a language, 1.3 percent are learning Chinese, 3.1 percent study Russian, 0.3 percent study Arabic and 1.6 percent study Japanese. To put this into a global context, over 10,000 Japanese businessmen speak English while only 100 U.S. businessmen speak Japanese. There are more teachers of English in the Soviet Union than students of Russian in the United States. European high school students often have taken four to twelve years of two and three languages. Botswana requires more language study by the fourth grade than the typical American school system requires by the end of high school.

It is not economics alone or the achievements of other nations that should be driving our interest in foreign language study. In the area of diplomacy, we are also at a distinct disadvantage when Embassy personnel are unable to understand the languages of host countries. The inability of most Embassy personnel to speak Farsi prior to the Iranian revolution precluded defensive measures that might have avoided the hostage situation. There is no guarantee this problem could have been avoided, but there is no doubt that almost all U.S. diplomatic personnel were unable to gauge the activism and intentions of the Iranian peoples other than through official, and often misleading, channels.

I have given a brief overview of our current status, and the beginnings of change in foreign language study. It is you, the teachers of foreign language, who will be expected to remedy problems that are not of your creation. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that you can remedy the situation by acknowledging the importance of your disciplines and supporting changing language requirements at all levels of education.

This is especially true in light of the following data. Only 10 percent of teachers currently working in elementary and secondary classrooms were ever exposed to international topics while in school. The number competent in foreign languages is even smaller. Statistics

for college-level instructors have not been collected but are similar to the numbers for pre-college teachers.

As foreign language teachers, you are members of an elite profession, and we as a nation must draw on your skill, dedication, and commitment in order to educate young people in languages and provide for them an international perspective. Yet your profession needs to stand up and be proud. Foreign language teachers need to be believers and take a stand. It is difficult to convince those in Washington to be supportive of foreign language issues if foreign language teachers do not send the message that their discipline is important and that our country will be better off with students who know a language and have a broad global perspective.

If we do not, we have everything to lose and nothing to gain.